



THE DIRECTOR GENERAL'S LETTER

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THE ETHICS OF DISCRETION

State Department review completed

Dean Acheson once remarked that press and publicity wash through the State Department "like the ocean through the open ports of a derelict." His successors have also occasionally succumbed to doubt that ours is The Silent Service.

This brings me to the subject of leaks. I think there are at least three kinds. The first is the classic security breach, which may result from inadvertence, carelessness or other factors. I shall not address the question of selling secrets for money, blackmail, etc. Human frailty is not our greatest security problem in this time.

The second kind of leak is not really a leak at all. Every day, responsible officers give the press information. This is to clarify policy or fact, to promote understanding and reduce mischief, and to discharge our duty to be accountable as we conduct the American people's business. The channels of communication for this kind of dialogue between our officers and the press should be expanded.

This desirable interchange is not working as well as it should, and the fault is shared. There has been untruth in Government and, in turn, a brand of advocacy journalism that jeopardizes care and truth in reporting. To take one recent example, a renowned reporter of one of our greatest newspapers checked a story a few days ago with a senior Departmental official with first-hand knowledge of the facts. He was flatly told that the story was untrue—and it *was* untrue. The newspaper printed the story anyway. This is a sad reflection on the erosion of trust between press and government.

I do not believe a Foreign Service officer has to lie. Veracity should be part of a Foreign Service officer's professional endowment. If he loses the reputation for it, he has lost a great part of his usefulness. Most of us have heard Jules Cambon's classic observation: "The best instrument at the disposal of a Government wishing to persuade another Government will always remain the spoken words of

a decent man." There are many things a good diplomatist does not say, and it is not always easy to protect secrets and not lie. But ours is not an easy profession.

The greatest damage to constructive interchange between Foreign Service officers and the press results from the third kind of leak. This is the leak designed to cut down a superior or colleague, or to gain advantage in an internal policy question in dispute. It is the malicious or calculated leak. Some of our most senior officials have been targets.

This practice is contrary to the integrity of our Service. Honorable public servants do not undermine their constituted superiors or colleagues through covert political action conducted through the press. In a policy disagreement, no Foreign Service officer has a right to prevail; nor to campaign against an adverse decision. What he should have is the opportunity to be heard as the decision is being made.

The Foreign Service is the professional instrument of each Administration—that is, the President and officials appointed by him with the advice and consent of the Senate. They face the voters or live by their verdict, and an Administration is accountable for its stewardship. We of the Career Service subvert our Constitutional role if we try to usurp political authority. We expect to serve each Administration loyally and give it our best advice. In return we hope our role and tenure will be respected. However, our upholding of a professional standard and ethic is not conditional on how we are treated or the degree to which we are included in policy decision. If we have pride in ourselves and our Service, we remain honorable and disciplined regardless of the trade-offs or lack of them.

All senior officials want to confer, react and sort out their positions in private. The malicious or interneine leak produces a withdrawal of confidence, and a progressive narrowing

of the circle of trust and participation at the policy level.

What happens when a dedicated public servant believes that the course of policy is wrong, and that he can morally no longer be party to it? There are few easy answers. A dilemma of conscience is seldom clear-cut. Of course, resignation would resolve the conflict and meet the dilemma of conscience, but not necessarily meet the problem. There are times when one must resign regardless of financial insecurity. Most senior officers of the Service worth their salt have raised the alternative of their own resignation at one time or another.

It behooves a Foreign Service officer to prepare himself for such an alternative—by earning an advanced degree, cultivating marketable business skills, etc. Any officer is more effective if he has an inner core of independence, of not being boxed in the Career. But there is little honor in staying, and using leaks as an out, or as an "integrity substitute."

Leave without pay is an alternative. So is transfer. While our Service will continue to uphold worldwide availability and discipline, I shall do my best as Director General to arrange your transfer if you find yourself in an intolerable position—assuming your motives are clearly not self-serving. But, short of the ultimate dilemmas which would touch on the legitimacy of our institutions and constituted leadership, you cannot honorably choose covert guerrilla warfare from within the organization.

Ours is an old profession. It deals with the secrets of state. If a diplomatist loses the confidence of his responsible political authorities, he cannot be effective. If other nations and their leaders cannot trust our diplomats' discretion, our diplomacy is gravely impaired.

Walter D. Davis